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Reintegrating Violent Extremist Offenders:
Policy Questions and Lessons Learned

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Program on
Extremism

About the Author

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Abstract

The presence of violent extremist offenders in prison can be a source of concern for prison authorities and policy officials. Not only is there fear of the spread of extremist ideologies among the inmate population, but also there is the worry that radicalized detainees will engage in extremist activities after being released. This paper highlights a number of issues and questions that policymakers will likely face when developing rehabilitation and reintegration programs for violent extremist offenders, and explores how these issues have been addressed in European countries.

Introduction

In Europe, concerns about radicalization have spurred the development of reform programs that seek to turn extremists and potential extremists alike into law-abiding citizens. Often, such programs aspire to do more than challenge ideological interpretations, aiming to provide assistance in other areas such as schooling, employment, housing, social relations, and psychological welfare. A frequently discussed example is the Danish Aarhus program, which connects police, state welfare services, and community organizations in providing a range of services to individuals returning from or wanting to travel to Syria.[1] Similar initiatives, with varying objectives and structures and at different stages of development, are being introduced in Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and other European countries.

One of the main challenges in reintegrating violent extremists is that little evidence exists concerning what does and does not work.[2] No tried and tested theory describing what needs to be done to ensure de-radicalization or successful re-entry into society currently exists, and very few programs have been evaluated (or have been running long enough to generate statistically significant outcomes). One size does not fit all: what works in one country may not work in another and each offender may require a unique approach or service. There is, as such, no straightforward guideline for policymakers when setting up and implementing reintegration efforts for violent extremist offenders.

Fortunately, the body of relevant research and expertise is growing and a number of reports, articles, and conference proceedings highlighting good practices and lessons learned have been published.[3] Over the past few years, experts and practitioners around the world have exchanged insights and experiences on issues such as program objectives, interventions, obstacles, and solutions. While still in a nascent state, the current body of knowledge provides ample direction for policymakers and prison authorities, identifying key questions and issues that must be dealt with when developing a program that fits their own unique situation.

One issue that is particularly debated is how authorities should deal with violent extremists in the prison system. The presence of violent extremist offenders in prison can be a source of concern for prison authorities and policy officials. Not only is there fear of the spread of extremist ideologies among the inmate population, but there is also the worry that radicalized detainees will engage in extremist activities after being released. The risk of re-offending among extremist ex-inmates has raised the question of what can be done to steer these individuals away from violence and promote peaceful transitions into society.[4]

This paper seeks to lend a hand in this process. In what follows, I will highlight a selection of policy issues that require decision-making, and explore whether and how such issues have been dealt with in Europe. My aim is not to provide answers, as they are likely to differ per country, prison, and even per individual. Rather, by the end of this paper I hope to have

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[1] See for example Tim Mansel, "How I was de-radicalised," *BBC News,* July 2, 2015.

[2] Angel Rabasa, Stacie L. Pettyjoh, Jeremy J. Ghez, and Christopher Boucek, *Deradicalizing Islamist Extremists*, RAND Corporation, 2010. See also The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism [START], *Assessing the Effectiveness of Current De-radicalization Initiatives and Identifying Implications for the Development of U.S.-Based Initiatives in Multiple Settings*, January 2009.

[3] See for instance *Rome Memorandum on Good Practices for Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Violent Extremist Offenders*, Global Counter Terrorism Forum [GCTF], 2012.

[4] See for example Sam Mullins, "Rehabilitation of Islamist Terrorists: Lessons from Criminology," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 3, no. 3 (2010): 162-193.

triggered thoughts about the reader's own context and the kinds of questions that may require answering in their particular policymaking setting.

Issues and Questions

A general lesson learned from experience with reintegration efforts is that it is useful to make the details of an intervention explicit on paper.[5] When designing correctional interventions to prevent violent extremism, policymakers hold a range of ideas about what the intervention aims to achieve, how it should be implemented, and what the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders in the process should be. Previous experiences have pointed at the importance of formalizing such ideas and producing unambiguous guidelines for the delivery of the intervention. This formalization allows for an assessment of whether the program is implemented as intended and whether it achieves its objectives.

In the Netherlands, an evaluation of the government's terrorism detention policy revealed that the decision-makers' negligence to put the policy details in writing resulted in a discrepancy in the decision-makers' intentions and the practitioners' understanding of the aim of the policy.[6] Also, without formal implementation guidelines, the practitioners were regularly confused about how they were expected to behave in particular situations and how they were supposed to deliver the intervention. The Dutch experience stresses the necessity of explicating decisions about the intervention's elements, including aims, procedures, and responsibilities, on paper.

Detention Context

Two of the first questions to emerge are where and how extremist prisoners should be detained. Specifically, should they be integrated into the mainstream inmate population or segregated in separate detention facilities?[7] Both options have benefits and challenges. Whereas integration exposes extremists to the potentially moderating influence of non-extremist fellow inmates, it also increases the risk of radicalization and recruitment among the mainstream inmate population. This risk is prevented by housing extremists in separate prison units, but this approach in turn increases the risk that already radicalized inmates reinforce each other's fundamentalist views and plot attacks together.

There is no universally accepted best practice on this matter, and European countries have taken different approaches. At present, the Netherlands is the only country that consistently segregates extremist prisoners in separate high-security facilities, but countries such as Belgium and France have recently experimented with similar strategies. Others, such as the UK, apply a mixed design and disperse terrorism offenders among a small number of high-

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[5] Tinka M. Veldhuis, *Designing Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programmes for Violent Extremist Offenders: A Realist Approach,* International Centre for Counter Terrorism [ICCT] – The Hauge, March 2012.
[6] Tinka M. Veldhuis, Ernestine H.Gordijn, Siegwart Lindenberg, and René Veenstra, *Terroristen in Detentie: Evaluatie van de Terroristenafdeling. [Terrorists in Detention: Review of the Terrorism Wing]*, Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum [Ministry of Security and Justice] – The Hauge, 2011.
[7] Clarke R. Jones and Resurrecion S. Morales, "Integration versus Segregation: A Preliminary Examination of Philippine Correctional Facilities for De-Radicalization," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35, no. 3 (2012): 211–228. See also Peter R. Neumann, *Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries*, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence [ICSR], 2010.

security prisons.[8] Overall, experts seem inclined to suggest that specialized security measures should be implemented on the basis of individual risk assessments, and should only be realized when, and as long as, doing so contributes to achieving the policy's objectives.[9]

In a similar vein, policymakers will have to decide whether extremist offenders should be subject to regular rehabilitation trajectories, or whether novel programs specifically tailored to the unique needs and challenges of this offender category should be developed. Existing experience suggests that extremists can benefit from traditional rehabilitation services, such as education, vocational training, and cognitive behavioral therapy.[10] However, extremists may have additional, unique needs that require specialized services like religious counseling and support in dealing with the potential consequences of being classified as a terrorism offender, such as blacklisting for social services or the freezing of financial assets.

Goals and Objectives

Although crucially important, the question of what rehabilitation practitioners are trying to achieve has proven to be difficult to answer. In designing reintegration programs for violent extremists, formulating unambiguous and measurable short-term and long-term objectives is crucial for monitoring progress and effectiveness.

In the first publications on extremist rehabilitation, the issue was often framed as the de-radicalization versus disengagement debate, revolving around the question of whether interventions should aim to establish a shift away from radical ideas (de-radicalization) or radical behavior (disengagement).[11] Whereas de-radicalization implies a cognitive change and the challenging of ideological, extremist principles, disengagement emphasizes a behavioral change regardless of whether this shift is accompanied by a change in attitude. John Horgan emphasized that the two—cognitive and behavioral change—do not always go together, and that interventions should be sensitive to the different pathways that individuals may take in moving away from violent extremism.[12]

More recently, this debate among scholars and policymakers alike appears to have embraced a more broadly defined ambition: to rehabilitate and reintegrate violent extremist offenders. This aspiration is, for instance, illustrated by the Danish Aarhus program, which focuses not only on changing extremist views and behaviors but also encompasses a comprehensive support structure intended to guide extremists' reintegration into society.[13] Presumably, one of the reasons for this expanded focus stems from the realization that successful re-entry in all areas of social life is crucial to prevent violent extremist and other criminal behavior; psychological or social problems may drive an individual back into the arms of extremist

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[8] Colin Murray, "'To Punish, deter and incapacitate': Incarceration and Radicalisation in UK prisons after 9/11," in *Prisons, Terrorism and Extremism: Critical Issues in Management, Radicalisation and* Reform, ed. Andrew Silke (London: Routledge, 2014): 16-32.

[9] See for a discussion Andrew Silke, ed., *Prisons, Terrorism and Extremism: Critical Issues in Management, Radicalisation and Reform*, (London: Routledge, 2014).

[10] For a discussion of good practices, see the GCTF Rome Memorandum.

[11] Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, ed., *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, (New York: Routledge, 2009).

[12] John Horgan, "Deradicalization or Disengagement?: A Process in Need of Clarity and a Counterterrorism Initiative in Need of Evaluation," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2, no. 4 (February 2008): 3-8.

[13] For example Kelly Cobiella, "Denmark De-Radicalization Program Aims to Reintegrate, Not Condemn," *NBC News,* May 24, 2015.

movements, even though he or she has changed his or her opinion of the validity of extremist ideology.

Target Population

A subsequent question that requires answering is "For whom is this program intended, and what measures will be used to determine eligibility?"

In many countries, de-radicalization and reintegration programs do not specifically target prisoners and ex-prisoners, but focus more generally on removing individuals from extremist environments.[14] For instance, the EXIT programs, which have been introduced in Sweden, Germany, and Norway, provide support for individuals who want to leave (mostly right-wing) extremist movements.[15] Likewise, the Aarhus program offers its services not only to individuals who have been arrested on their way to or from Syria, but also to those who have been identified by friends and family as potentially radicalizing. In Germany, the Violence Prevention Network, a re-entry program originally designed to support right-wing extremist prisoners in their transition to society, has evolved to support individuals linked to religious extremism.[16] Interestingly, this program only targets followers; ideological leaders are excluded from participation.[17]

It is crucial that the selection criteria are adequately tailored to the nature of the problem, so that all those—and only those—individuals for whom the intervention is designed are actually reached. This point is emphasized by the Dutch experience. In the Netherlands, *all* inmates suspected or convicted of terrorism offences are ordered to a specialized high-security facility, regardless of whether they have displayed signs of radicalization or recruitment. This means that individuals who may not be fully radicalized or who are suspected of relatively minor (e.g. financial) terrorism offenses are automatically subjected to a specialized and restrictive regime designed for extremists where they may be exposed to the influence of ideological leaders. In such cases, it is questionable whether the selection criteria are adequately tailored to the problem and, hence, whether the policy is suitable to achieve its objectives.[18]

Other issues that may arise include the question of whether rehabilitation and reintegration efforts should also target individuals who will be deported and will thus leave the country in which they have been detailed after release. Likewise, it may be relevant to decide whether, and if so how, to offer reintegration programs to individuals who serve short sentences or

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[14] For a more general discussion of de-radicalization and reintegration efforts in Europe, see Lorenzo Vidino and James Brandon, *Countering Radicalization in Europe*, ICSR, 2012. In respect to the Netherlands, see D.J. Weggemans and B.A. de Graaf, *Na de vrijlating: Een exploratieve studie naar recidive en re-integratie van jihadistische ex-gedetineerden [After Release: An Exploratory Study on Recidivism and Reintegration of Ex-Jihadist Detainees]*, (Amsterdam, Holland: Reed Business Information, May 2015).

[15] For example Vidino and Brandon, *Countering Radicalization in Europe*.

[16] Riazat Butt and Henry Tuck, *European Counter-Radicalisation and De-radicalisation: A Comparative Evaluation of Approaches in the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Germany,* Institute for Strategic Dialogue [ISD], 2014. See also Birger Hartnuß, *Verantwortung übernehmen – Abschied von Hass und Gewalt: Arbeit mit rechtsextremistisch orientierten Jugendlichen innerhalb des Jugendstrafvollzugs – Betreuung nach der Haftentlassung [Taking Responsibility – Farewell to Hatred and Violence: Working with Right-wing Extremist Oriented Youth in Juvenile Detention – Care After Release from Prison],* Jody Korn and Helmut Heitmann, ed., Violence Prevention Network, 2012.

[17] Weggemans and de Graaf, *Na de vrijlating*.

[18] Veldhuis, et al., *Terroristen in Detentie*.

who are released for lack of evidence, as these individuals may leave the correctional system before the intervention has properly started. In all, there is reason to recommend conscientiousness in the formulation of selection criteria—be it for specialized detention measures or reintegration programs—to ensure that they are comprehensive, goal-oriented, and follow logically from a problem analysis.

Stakeholders and Responsibilities

Comprehensive reintegration programs are multifaceted and require intense collaboration and information sharing between all stakeholders. In practice, however, this often proves to be a major challenge. Stakeholders may have conflicting interests and competing ideas about what needs to be done and how, and it may be a challenge to get all relevant parties engaged and willing to collaborate.

Who should serve as the primary responsible and coordinating party, and what should the responsibilities of the different stakeholders be? Should the main authority be centralized with the prison service, probation, police, or counterterrorism forces? In the Netherlands, the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTv) has assumed a leading role in the implementation of reintegration trajectories, and has collaborated with prisons, probation services, and local governments.[19] The latter are generally responsible for implementing reintegration programs, although this responsibility has historically generated challenges. For example, in the case of a de-radicalization program for right-wing extremists in the Netherlands, some subjects attempted to avoid the attention of local authorities by moving to a different municipality, effectively transferring the problem, and thus the responsibility for the de-radicalization program, to a different local government.[20]

Another issue that has received ample attention in the scholarly and policy debate concerns the recruitment and training of program staff. Personnel must be carefully selected and trained in the necessary skills to manage this category of offenders and ex-offenders. For instance, staff may require additional training to recognize signs of radicalization and recruitment, secure their own safety and the safety of the inmates, and understand individuals' unique needs and requirements. International training modules of this kind are currently being developed and implemented by a number of international counterterrorism bodies, including the Global Counterterrorism Forum, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) – The Hague, and the Global Center on Cooperative Security.

Assessing Risks and Progress

How can officials assess the risk of future violence among extremist offenders and ex-offenders, and how can the progress of participants in reintegration programs be measured? Measuring extremism is exceptionally challenging and the low incidence of violent radicalization makes it difficult to develop evidence-based instruments. In recent years, experts have worked to create a number of risk assessment tools, suggesting a variety of techniques for measuring extremist attitudes and behaviors. Some authors have suggested that instruments used to assess other inmate groups, such as extremely violent offenders, may be

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[19] Weggemans and de Graaf, *Na de vrijlating*.
[20] Froukje Demant, Willem Wagenaar, and Japp van Donselaar, "Monitor Racisme en Extremisme: Deradicaliseren in de Praktijk [Racism and Extremism Monitor: Deradicalization in Practice]," (Amsterdam, Holland: Anne Frank Stichting, 2009).

useful when testing extremist populations, but opinion differs on this matter. In general, experts seem to agree that the assessment of extremist prisoners requires specialized, or at least additional, tests.[21]

At present, at least three risk assessment tools have been created (and are still in development) specifically for violent extremist populations. One is the Extremist Risk Guidance 22+ (ERG22+), developed by the British National Offender Management Service. The ERG22+ assesses offenders on 22 cognitive and behavioral factors theoretically associated with extremism.[22] The second is Violent Extremist Risk Assessment (VERA), which measures attitudinal, contextual, historical, protective, and demographic factors that may be indicative of both radicalization and de-radicalization.[23] The third instrument, developed by Arie Kruglanski and colleagues, has produced promising results in measuring the attitudes and behavioral intentions of extremists in Sri Lanka and the Philippines.[24]

Preconditions for Success

Previous experience has stressed the importance of identifying the circumstances under which an intervention can be expected to be successful. One issue to consider in this regard is whether the intervention may counteract other counterterrorism policies. In the Netherlands, a recent study revealed that efforts to reintegrate violent extremists are hindered by the policy to place terrorism offenders on international sanctions lists and freeze their financial assets. For instance, while municipalities and civil service institutions aim to assist released terrorism offenders in applying for a job or welfare, many of these individuals are unable to receive payments because they are not allowed to open a bank account.[25]

In a similar vein, it is important to acknowledge that relatives and friends can affect the outcomes of reintegration trajectories, both positively and negatively. Relatives and significant others can play a crucial role in either supporting or undermining the reintegration process. An ex-offender may renounce violent extremism and be motivated to live a law-abiding life, but if his family members remain radicalized and encourage him to return to extremist networks and activities, reintegration efforts may be in vain. Most programs in Europe take measures to include the family in the process. For instance, the German Violence Prevention Network offers extensive assistance to family members of extremist offenders, both during and after imprisonment.[26]

Other Issues to Consider

In addition to specifying different program elements, policymakers may have to consider other issues that can influence the outcomes and functionality of the intervention.

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[21] See for a discussion Silke, ed., *Prisons, Terrorism and Extremism.*

[22] Her Majesty's Government, "Extremism Risk Guidelines: ERG 22+ Structured Professional Guidelines for Assessing Risk of Extremist Offending," National Offender Management Service, 2011.

[23] D. Elaine Pressman and John Flockton, "Calibrating Risk for Violent Political Extremists and Terrorists: The VERA2 Structured Assessment," *The British Journal of Forensic Practice* 14, no. 4 (2012): 237-251.

[24] Arie W. Kruglanski, Michele J. Gelfand, Jocelyn J. Bélanger, Rohan Gunaratna, and Malkanthi Hettiarachchi, "De-radicalising the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE): Some Preliminary Findings," in *Prisons, Terrorism and Extremism: Critical Issues in Management, Radicalisation and Reform*, ed. Andrew Silke (London: Routledge, 2014), 183-198.

[25] For a discussion see Weggemans and de Graaf, *Na de vrijlating*, 116-120.

[26] Butt and Tuck, *European Counter-Radicalisation and De-radicalisation.*

One of these issues concerns communication about the intervention targeted toward the public. How and to what extent will details about the intervention and its outcomes be communicated to the public? How will the intervention be presented in external communication and how may this influence the relevant communities? Stigmatization may be a real concern for released (former) extremists. Hence, it matters a great deal whether a reintegration policy is presented to the public as, for instance, a counterterrorism policy, a regular criminal justice measure, or a civil society initiative. Different terminology has different connotations, with implications for how ex-offenders are perceived by the community. For instance, in the Netherlands, the decision to officially introduce the high-security prison for terrorism offenders as the 'Terrorism Unit' was publicly criticized for causing stigmatization and negative labeling of the inmates and ex-inmates alike.[27]

Another lesson learned is that it is valuable, if not essential, to incorporate evaluation mechanisms into the design of the intervention, thereby facilitating periodic review of the intervention's implementation and effectiveness. Due to the lack of evidence-based knowledge in this field, rehabilitation and reintegration programs for violent extremist offenders are generally implemented on a trial and error basis. Evaluations are essential to the examination and promotion of accountability, and offer direction for the adaption and improvement of interventions. Moreover, examinations are crucial to building a knowledge base of what does and does not work in reintegration. To this end, it is exceptionally useful to specify explicitly on which dimensions the program is expected to produce change (for example attitudes, motivation, or skills), and to assess these dimensions before, during, and after the intervention.

Conclusion

This paper highlighted a number of issues that policymakers and prison authorities may encounter in the process of developing and implementing reintegration programs for violent extremist offenders, and explored how such issues have been addressed in Europe. Although the aim was not to provide clear-cut answers but rather to trigger thoughts and questions about the reader's own policy context, a few notable points stand out.

- One of the main questions that policymakers face is whether violent extremist offenders should be detained in separate prison units or integrated into the mainstream inmate population. There is no universally accepted good practice in this regard, although it is generally suggested that specialized measures should be informed by personal risk assessments and implemented on an individual basis.
- An important lesson is that formalizing intervention details on paper—such as objectives, stakeholder responsibilities, and implementation guidelines—is useful, if not essential, for the prevention of misunderstandings among stakeholders and the facilitation of assessments of the program's functioning and effectiveness.
- In order to review and, where necessary, make improvements to the intervention, it is important to define the program's intended outcomes in unambiguous and measurable terms.
- Similarly, to ensure that the intervention can be truly goal-oriented and is adequately tailored to address the policy problem, it is important to identify the target population in clear and unambiguous terms.

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[27] Veldhuis, et al., *Terroristen in Detentie*. See also Weggemans and de Graaf, *Na de vrijlating.*

- Reintegration efforts require intense collaboration and a willingness to share information among stakeholders involved. To facilitate and coordinate this process, it may be useful to formalize stakeholder responsibilities and identify which actors assume primary responsibility and coordination for the intervention.
- An important question is how to monitor risks and progress. Violent extremists are likely to require additional assessments relative to other groups of prisoners. Several risk assessment tools are currently available (and being developed) that address the unique nature of this type of offending.
- To ensure that the program can function as intended, it is relevant to identify in advance under which conditions the program is likely to be successful and when it should be classified a failure. Again, preconditions for success should be formulated in unambiguous, measurable terms and are ideally explicated on paper.
- External communication about the intervention may have a profound effect on its outcomes and functioning. Drafting a communication strategy may be a useful tactic in designing the program and can play an important role in preventing undesired outcomes such as stigmatization.
- Periodic evaluation is crucial to facilitate continuation, accountability, and legitimacy of the intervention, and contributes to developing a knowledge base for future policymaking. Ideally, evaluation mechanisms are integrated into the policy design from the start so the program can be assessed over time.